



## Voices from the Gaps

# Sandra Cisneros

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*My mother says when I grow older my dusty hair will settle and my blouse will learn to stay clean, but I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain. In the movies there is always one with red red lips who is beautiful and cruel. She is the one who drives men crazy and laughs them all the way. Her power is her own. She will not give it away.*

— The House on Mango Street

”



## Biography

Sandra Cisneros did not have a “normal” childhood. “As a person growing up in a society where the class norm was superimposed on a television screen, I couldn’t understand why our home wasn’t all green lawns and white wood like the ones in ‘Leave It To Beaver’ and ‘Father Knows Best’” (Ghosts 72). She wanted desperately to believe that her poverty was just a temporary situation, so she looked toward stories to escape. There was a book called *The Little House* that she checked out of the library over and over again. The house in the story was her dream house because it was one house for one family, and it was permanent and stable.

### Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1954
- \* Chicana poet and novelist
- \* One of her most famous novels is *The House on Mango Street*

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# Sandra Cisneros

## Biography continued

Throughout Cisneros' life, her Mexican-American mother, her Mexican father, her six brothers, and she would move between Mexico City and Chicago, never allowing her much time to get settled in any one place. Her loneliness from not having sisters or friends drove her to reading and burying herself in books. In high school she wrote poetry and was the literary magazine editor, but according to Cisneros, she didn't really start writing until her first creative writing class in college in 1974. After that it took a while to find her own voice.

She explains, "I rejected what was at hand and emulated the voices of the poets I admired in books: big male voices like James Wright and Richard Hugo and Theodore Roethke, all wrong for me" (Ghosts 72). Cisneros then realized that she needed to write what she knew, and adopted a writing style that was purposely opposite to that of her classmates. Five years after receiving her MA from the writing program at the University of Iowa, she returned to Loyola University in Chicago, where she had previously earned a BA in English, to work as an administrative assistant. Prior to this job, she worked in the Chicano barrio in Chicago teaching to high school dropouts. Through these jobs, she gained more familiarity with the problems of young Latinas.

Cisneros' writing has been shaped by her experiences. Because of her unique background, Cisneros is very different from traditional American writers. She has something to say that they don't know about. She also has her own way of saying it. Her first book, *The House on Mango Street*, is an elegant literary piece, somewhere between fiction and poetry. She doesn't just make up characters, but writes about real people that she has encountered in her lifetime. Cisneros' work explores issues that are important to her: feminism, love, oppression, and religion. In "Ghosts and Voices: Writing From Obsession," she says, "If I were asked what it is I write about, I would have to say I write about those ghosts inside that haunt me, that will not let me sleep, of that which even memory does not like to mention" (73).



# Sandra Cisneros

## Biography continued

America has welcomed Cisneros like a cool drink of water on a hot Chicago day. *The House on Mango Street* started out without very high expectations, but over time it has become widely known. It was awarded the Before Columbus American Book Award in 1985, and has been taught in a variety of academic disciplines including Women's Studies, Ethnic Studies, English, Creative Writing, Sociology, and even Sex Education. Even though *Mango Street* has been highly acclaimed, her collection of poems, *My Wicked Wicked Ways*, is perhaps the most widely read (Tompkins 37). Cisneros could be considered a fresh new voice in Chicana literature. According to Cynthia Tompkins of Arizona State University West, "Today Cisneros is perhaps the most visible Chicana in mainstream literary circles. The vividness of her vignettes and the lyrical quality of her prose attest to her craft" (Tompkins 40). Among other awards over the years, Cisneros received the first of two National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships in 1982 that allowed her to write full time. Hopefully Sandra Cisneros will be able to keep on writing for many years to come.

## Selected Bibliography

### Works by the author

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### Readings and Interviews

Sandra Cisneros reads from *The House on Mango Street*, and *Woman Hollering Creek*, and talks about the Chicana experience in life and fiction (sound recording), hosted by Tom Vitale (Moveable Feast, 1990).



# Sandra Cisneros

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# Sandra Cisneros

## Works in languages other than English

### Chinese

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### German

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### Italian

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### Spanish

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